Universities Scotland's submission to the Education, Children and Young People Committee on the attainment challenge

Universities Scotland is the representative body of the Principals of Scotland's 19 higher education institutions. We work closely with senior professional networks across the higher education sector. In regard to the attainment challenge and learner progression from school into university, our Learning and Teaching Committee of Vice Principals, and our Admissions Policy Group of senior university admissions professionals, are most relevant.

Work to address the attainment challenge in schools is of obvious interest to higher education as we still have a challenge to further widen access to university. The two are strongly interconnected, with school leavers accounting for approximately 45% of undergraduate entrants in any given year.[1] We elaborate on this point below, in response to the question on what could be improved.

What has worked well?

We are pleased that the Scottish Government is taking steps to address the attainment gap in schools. There is an obvious "pipeline" of talent from schools into university and universities want to admit applicants on the basis of talent and potential to develop that talent further.

One of the challenges for universities in addressing fair access issues is the attainment gap in schools. Universities have implemented contextual admissions and minimum entry requirements linked to socio-economic disadvantage (as introduced in 2019) to recognise that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds may not demonstrate their full potential through school-level qualifications. However, applicants still need to meet these minimum requirements to demonstrate that they will thrive in higher education and get an offer to study at university. The stubborn nature of the attainment gap suggests that there are still learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who are not able to realise their full potential at school. Moreover, since the attainment gap opens up at an early age[2], pupils may have many years of educational disadvantage before they consider their post-school possibilities.

Of course, there are many routes to university for adult returners and there can be a benefit in studying after a break from education, but it would be preferable if all learners were able to realise their full potential at school and then make an informed choice about what to do next.

What could improve?

We think there are several data areas that could be improved by the Scottish Government, both in terms of collection, focus and accessibility.

More granularity in school leaver attainment data. The school leaver statistics data on attainment (School leaver attainment and destinations - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)) is based on achievement of only 1+ qualification at a given Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) level. Whilst this

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[1] UCAS End of Cycle Data Resource for 2021. The figure is based on 17 and 18 year old accepted applicants to Scottish providers.

[2] The Poverty-related Attainment Gap: A review of the evidence. Laura Robertson and Fiona McHardy, The Poverty Alliance, February 2021 https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-Poverty-related-Attainment-Gap-A-Review-of-the-Evidence-2.pdf

may be a useful marker for attainment for other purposes, it is not helpful in judging the attainment gap in regard to leavers' prospects of progression to university because undergraduate degree courses require more than one Higher qualification (or equivalent)[3]. So, the Scottish Government's school leaver statistics that tell us what proportion of SIMD20 learner achieve at least one pass at Higher offer no indication of how many SIMD20 learners may be qualified for university entry. This point reinforces our introductory comment that the policy, data and funding linked to the attainment challenge should take a system-wide approach to our education sector at all levels of study.

In 2018, the Scottish Government released data ([govscot:document (www.gov.scot)](www.gov.scot)) looking at both the number and grades of (Higher and Advanced Higher) qualifications and we believe that a measure that incorporates this would be useful in assessing the attainment gap.

Consider equality and diversity as well as socio-economic characteristics. There may be benefit from looking at attainment by protected characteristic (and the intersectionality of socioeconomic data with protected characteristics) and also by rural/urban classifications. This should look at the data on qualifications and grades, similar to the 2018 analysis for fair access as referenced above.

Add free school meals as a metric. We also think that examining socioeconomic disadvantage by free school meal eligibility would be useful as this gives us an individual, person-centred measure of inequality to complement SIMD as an area-based or data-zone metric. This was recommended by the Scottish Government's own [Access Data Working Group](#) in 2019, who found that being in receipt of free school meals at secondary school was a strong indicator of disadvantage. We acknowledge there are limitations with the free school meal eligibility as a measure, but there are very well acknowledged limitations with the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) as a measure because not all socio-economically disadvantaged people live in areas of multiple deprivation. The introduction to the 2020 version of SIMD notes that about 2/3 of all income deprived people do not live in the 15% most deprived areas in Scotland and indeed only around 1/3 of people living in the 15% most deprived areas are income deprived ([Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2020: introduction - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)](www.gov.scot)).

Universities Scotland first called for other data, including free school meals, to be deployed as an additional metric, or a basket of metrics, for tracking access to university in 2014 in *Action on Access.* Since then, many stakeholders and other organisations have agreed that it would add value to this shared agenda. It would particularly benefit pupils/students in Scotland's remote and rural areas which are poorly served by the over-reliance on SIMD as a determinant of policy and funding support.

Finally, it might be useful to consider destinations post school as part of the attainment gap and look at the numbers of school leavers progressing to school, college, and university (as individual destinations) because at least one purpose in addressing the attainment gap is to equalise opportunities after school.

Do more to take a whole-system approach to Scottish education. It is our view that all parts of Scotland's education sector need to be thought of as an entire ecosystem. This is entirely different from taking a homogenous approach to all parts of the system, which would be inappropriate. We strongly believe that we can achieve more in addressing educational inequality as a country if our efforts are strategically aligned and joined-up. We also think there is potential to take a whole-ecosystem approach far more successfully than has been achieved so far. This is a point we have made

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[3] (with the exception of the Open University which does not have conventional entry requirements)

to the Commissioner on Widening Access (whose remit does allow scope to consider schools), to the Scottish Government on many occasions and to the Education Committee under a previous parliamentary session. It is clear that universities will face serious challenges in meeting the widening access target of 20% of entrants to university from SIMD20 areas by 2030 without significantly accelerated progress in addressing the attainment gap in schools. Universities have worked incredibly hard, through investment, outreach and policy change, to reach the interim target of 16% of entrants last year. This was achieved in 2021, ahead of time, with 16.4% of entrants from SIMD20 areas, using data from 2019/20 but the Commissioner himself has said that the "*last miles are often the most difficult*".[4]

There is to be a change of Commissioner in 2022, as the incumbent steps down from the role. We see this as an opportunity to refresh the scope of the role, its responsibilities, its independence from Government and the resource available to the office. Empowering the Commissioner to go further to take an entire overview across the education ecosystem, from school through to university, would meet a clear need. This would be the only apolitical post to have this scope in Scotland (with the only other posts/structures to have that full-sector remit being the Cabinet Secretary for Education and the Scottish Parliament's Education, Young people and Skills Committee).

How is the impact of funding measured?

Universities have not been a recipient of this funding so it would not be appropriate for us to comment.

What has been the impact of the pandemic on attainment and achievement in schools?

A long legacy of impact on learners. Others are better placed to comment on the learner experience in schools throughout the pandemic and how that has, or may yet, manifest itself in attainment levels. We would make the comment that the pandemic is likely to have a long negative legacy effect on young people and school pupils, lasting years beyond the presence of COVID-restrictions on our everyday lives.

The limited data available makes it hard to assess this in more depth. However, we anticipate negative effects on attainment owing to the closure of schools and particularly in the first lockdown the lack of consistency in what teaching was available to pupils across Scotland. Certainly, in universities we know that some students struggled because they lacked IT or broadband or suitable study space free from disruptions, so we imagine that would also be the case in schools. Universities are also finding that some learners have increased difficulty with the social aspects of learning.

One obvious concern, as society returns to something resembling normal, is what disparity there will be amongst pupils sitting National 5 and Higher exams in 2022, the first school exams for two years. These pupils lack experience, and potentially confidence, in formal exams. We are concerned that greater inequality in school leaver attainment will open-up in this context and about the knock-on impact on learner confidence to make the transition into further or higher education. Last spring/summer we polled a number of Scottish-domiciled school leavers about the impact the pandemic was having on their education and mental health. Those whose parental occupation was

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[4] Commissioner for Fair Access (2019) Annual Report https://www.gov.scot/publications/commissioner-fair-access-annual-report-2019-building-progress-towards-fair-access/pages/1/

classified as C2DE were significantly more concerned about the impact on their ability to prepare assignments, at 68% very or moderately worried compared to 57% of pupils whose parental occupation was classified as ABC1. Worse still, 71% of pupils categorised as C2DE were very or moderately worried about the impact of the pandemic on their Higher/Advanced Higher results compared to 51% of pupils classified as ABC1.[5]

The school leaver data ([School leaver attainment and destinations - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)](www.gov.scot)) shows an increase in the attainment gap for the numbers of school leavers achieving at least 1+ qualification at SCQF level 6 in 2020 the gap was 36.1 percentage points, but in 2019 it was 35.8 percentage points. This is significant because Highers are a SCQF level 6 qualification.

Universities have provided additional study support to students (new and continuing) over the last two academic years to help address any skills gap arising from the pandemic and its impact on education. We expect this to be needed for several years as we support students to recover from the effects of the pandemic.

ENDS

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[5] YouthSight & Universities Scotland (2021) Students and COVID 19. https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/in-person_learning_new_ay/